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ABSTRACT

Current higher education assessment practices and goals of additional assessment are discussed in testimony before the National Governors Association Task Force on College Quality. Ways to improve the assessment process are also suggested by the chair-elect of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. In addition to student course grades, additional assessment systems include questionnaires of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. Regional and specialized accreditation are noted as ways to strengthen review of the curriculum. Difficulties with the use of a standard single assessment approach are noted. Weaknesses of the current system of assessment are identified: many institutions do not fully evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum, particularly the general education component; and available data are not effectively used. Approaches that may improve the higher education assessment system include: making data comparative; communicating assessment information to the relevant decision-makers; providing financial and psychological support to those who make changes based on the information; and involving faculty in evaluating the impact of the curriculum. (SW)

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TESTIMONY

for the

NATIONAL GOVERNORS ASSOCIATION TASK FORCE ON COLLEGE QUALITY

on behalf of the

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE COLLEGES
AND UNIVERSITIES

given by

Hoke L. Smith, President
Towson State University
Towson, Maryland

February 22, 1986

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--an annual conference
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I am Hoke Smith, President of Towson State University in Towson, Maryland. I am also a member of the Board of Directors of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and Chair-Elect of the association.

The higher education community appreciates the concern shown by the National Governors Association and the Educational Commission of the States about the condition of higher education. I personally appreciate this opportunity to testify on behalf of my colleagues in AASCU.

AASCU presented testimony before this task force at the hearing in St. Louis. I endorse this testimony and will not either summarize it or repeat it in detail. Instead I wish to make some general observations about the condition of higher education and then concentrate on one type of assessment most of us fear and will oppose, and on steps that will receive general support over time and that can be implemented to improve assessment and its use.

Problems of Higher Education

The current problems and concerns of higher education spring from our past successes as a nation, not our failures. We have expanded our higher educational system to educate the baby boomers, to create access for women, minorities and non-traditional students, to serve dozens of new programs and professions such as computer science, and to deal with profound social and economic changes within the United States. This extended period of growth and change has brought some lack of

coherence in our curriculums and a broader array of characteristics and achievements in our student bodies.

Higher education leaders have been aware of these problems and during the last decade have initiated efforts to reinvigorate liberal education and to strengthen the quality of the new professional programs. Additional problems include the declining purchasing power of the faculty, aging physical plants, increasing expense of current equipment, and increasing regulation and external control. I hope that you will address these problems, as well as assessment, for they are real.

Goals of Education

Assessment is the measurement of an existing condition against a goal. Howard Bowen, in Investment in Learning, examined 1500 different educational goals gleaned from catalogs which he summarized in the attached five-page list. It is obvious that no one instrument or indicator can assess all the goals of higher education. And this is a list of educational goals. It does not emphasize other goals of higher education such as research or service. However, since the issue seems to be educational effectiveness, I will confine my comments to educational goals.

Peter Ewell simplifies the classification of these goals into three changes that occur in students as a result of education. They are cognitive development, skills development, and attitudinal development. He believes that skills development is the most legitimate subject of the three for widespread

assessment. The most frequent criticisms I have heard of college graduates have been of deficiencies in basic skills such as writing, listening, and work habits. Although these basic skills are goals of education from kindergarten through college, they are not the essence of higher education. The measurement of cognitive development and information acquisition are much more difficult to accomplish without threatening academic diversity and freedom.

At the present time goals are set in many ways. The faculty has the primary responsibility for the establishment of both course and curricular goals. This responsibility creates a very decentralized system which is highly resistent to central domination and which protects diversity of opinion. In setting these goals faculty are influenced by scholarly research, trends in their disciplines, entrance requirements of graduate and professional schools, regional and specialized accrediting associations, licensing requirements, interests of employers, and interests of students and their families. Even this list is incomplete. It is a highly decentralized political system which protects diverse viewpoints, yet is responsive to educational, social, and political forces.

Many of us are concerned about how the educational goals for statewide assessment might be established. Under the current system the setting of educational goals is decentralized, a protection of freedom. If the state is going to give a standard test to measure against goals, who is going to set the goals?

What are the methods of reviewing and changing those goals? What happens to the forms of inquiry that are not included in the goals? Who is to hold the test makers accountable for the goals they build into the assessment instrument? Will the establishment of standard goals tend to "freeze" the system and deter the incorporation of new views or knowledge into the curriculum? What parts of higher education will be deemphasized as institutions focus on the goals incorporated in the assessment system?

Higher Education Is an Assessed System

Higher education is assessed constantly for many different purposes. Indeed, the essence of the scholarly process is assessment and criticism. The academic process is based on the consistent criticism of alternative versions of truth. This continuing assessment of truth is responsible for the restless, unsettled nature of academic inquiry that has driven progress in human knowledge through basic and applied research. Any static method of assessment that would establish an orthodoxy would strike at a basic driving force of national strength.

An essential part of undergraduate education, as distinguished from K-12 education, is training students in alternative methods of seeking and validating truth. This inevitably results in alternating periods of certainty and confusion as the student moves through the educational process. The important point is that a distinguishing characteristic of undergraduate education is teaching the process of searching for

truth and in doing so, learning how to validate or reject orthodoxy.

Current Assessment Practices

Since assessment is a basic part of the academic process, the question must be, "Are current assessment practices adequate?" That leads to the question, "Adequate for what?" Obviously they must have been adequate enough to educate millions of productive citizens and for some to say that higher education needs to be improved. I would like to comment on these two questions briefly.

Each one of us in this room with a college degree was assessed by some variation of our traditional assessment system. The basic assessment system used is the grading of the student's work in a course by the individual professor. This is a highly decentralized assessment system. The goals of the work assessed vary widely from simply the learning of information to the application of skills. This system has the advantage of protecting the freedom of the faculty to set goals and to establish standards. Although it does not create uniformity of quality, it is a system which has worked over the years and which does encourage diversity and protects academic freedom. Because assessment is tied to course credit rather than to the overall curriculum, this system permits students to be highly mobile in moving across the country and to reenter college on a part-time basis.

Many institutions use additional assessment systems such as

the NCHEMS questionnaires, the Graduate Record Examination, the Institutional Goals Inventory, and many other commercial and institutionally developed techniques. Some majors are screened in many institutions, that is, a student must pass prerequisite courses or tests at a specified level before being admitted to advanced standing.

Towson State University is an example of an institution that uses a variety of techniques. We use remedial screening of incoming freshmen. Students must meet remedial requirements before entering the sophomore year. We use the NCHEMS questionnaires and a variety of discipline specific assessment methods. We are not using the GRE and ACT-COMP because of cost and staff limitations. We also have regular program reviews. We also use post-graduation surveys of alumni employers. Many of our students in professional programs have to take licensing examinations. If we receive the results of these examinations, these are another form of assessment.

The weaknesses of the current system of assessment are that most institutions do not fully evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum, particularly the general education component, and that information which is already available is not effectively used. I will discuss these weaknesses more fully in a few moments.

Regional and Specialized Accreditation

Regional and specialized accreditation are means of attempting to strengthen review of the curriculum. Regional accreditation focuses on the resources and processes used by the institution to achieve its stated mission and goals. The accreditation procedure focuses on the extent to which good resource utilization and processes are being used in the achievement of those goals and on what aspects of the institution's functioning are interfering with good practice and good results.

Specialized accreditation focuses more narrowly on the quality of a specific program within the context of institutional resource utilization and good practice.

Although the systems of regional and specialized accreditation have been criticized for being both too flexible and too rigid, they do result in periodic and searching self examination on the part of institutions. Specialized accreditation tends to be input and goal oriented, but also closely examines curriculum, faculty, support facilities, students, and the attitudes of employers or licensing agencies.

Components of Assessment

Often discussions of assessment focus on the process of evaluation. But the process of assessment contains more than simply testing. One list of the components of assessment might contain the purpose of assessment, the goal being evaluated, the instrument or process by which the assessment is carried out, the

evaluation of th results, and the use of the results of the evaluation for some purpose.

Evaluation, like all forms of information, costs money. Not only does conducting the evaluation cost money, but if the results of the evaluation are to be used for a concrete purpose, the implementation of systems' changes cost money. Evaluation cannot be discussed apart from its implementation.

What Do We Want to Accomplish by Additional Assessment?

Few of the papers I have read propose abandoning any of the existing assessment techniques. Rather, the discussions point toward the addition of more and different approaches. We need to ask, "What do we want to accomplish by additional assessment?"

Purposes of Assessment

Frequently mentioned purposes of assessment of higher education are, first, to sort, scre n, qualify, or certify students for entry into a program or a job, to rank them for some benefit, or to award some type of credential. A second purpose is that of human development; that is, to diagnose students' educational needs for placement or advising. A third purpose is to measure the performance of an institution or program for reasons of program modification, certification, or funding. A fourth purpose is to compare or rank institutions. A fifth purpose is to hold institutions accountable on the basis of single indicator.

Certainly the first three of these reasons are legitimate reasons for improving assessment. The fourth and fifth are more

problematic and, indeed, may be dangerous to the academic process. This leads to what we fear, and what many of us, including the faculty, will oppose.

The Politics of the Single Figure

Sometimes in testimony such as this we tend to dance around some of the real issues which bother us. I do not feel that I would have served my association, my profession, or my country if I did not discuss the issue which I believe underlies much of our careful rhetoric. This issue is the politics of the single figure indicator. I do not mean to set up a "strawman" by focusing on this issue. Rather I mean to give voice to our fears which, if not addressed, will increase the tension associated with assessment and lessen its positive impact.

The object of single figure politics is to reduce to a single figure a complex process. This technique is part of our political and professional lives. It is the bottom line syndrome. Once we have reduced complex reality to a single index figure, organizations, governments, and institutions play the game of operating to maximize that index figure. The organizations' performance on the index improves. The assessment process has improved performance.

This is, of course, a simple description of a complex process. But we have all seen it operate. Two of the best examples in higher education are the use of the SAT scores and the amount of research grants as indicators of how well either a liberal arts college or a research university are doing.

A serious problem with a single index number is that it is of limited use in measuring a complex process without distortion. Such indices tend to simplify what is being evaluated and freeze the process into functioning to maximize the evaluation index. In a complex process with many goals, efforts to maximize one goal may work to decrease the achievement of other goals. Because the goals of education are complex, emphasis on one or two goals may have an unmeasured detrimental effect on other desirable goals.

Many of those who wish to demystify assessment seem to be seeking a single number that can represent diverse institutions with different missions. Such an effort ignores the varied goals of education, the social value of disagreement stemming from intellectual freedom, and the differences among our many ethnic and cultural groups.

An analogous effort would be to attempt to assess a state government on the basis of what its citizens do and feel. The assessment of both education and government is difficult because both have many goals and activities (some of which are contradictory), and both operate as parts of larger systems which affect what students and citizens do and feel. I believe that this analogy is valid, so please ask yourselves the question in your deliberations, "How would this general approach to assessment work in evaluating state government as a whole?"

The Value of Freedom

Many of us fear that efforts to develop a standard single figure assessment approach will tend to standardize our curriculums and create a chilling effect on the academic process. Such single figure indices could be sophomore achievement tests, rising junior tests, or standardized comprehensive exit examinations. I know that they are not intended to be used that way, but we have only to look at the use of the SAT tests and teacher examinations which have been used as surrogates for institutional or system effectiveness.

Assessment and Consumer Education

In addition to our fear of single figure assessment, we are concerned that such assessment may be applied only to public and not to private institutions. Those who advocate assessment to improve consumer information have not made clear whether or not the private sector is included. Most statements I have seen have excluded the private sector, usually on grounds of protection of diversity. Yet the state regulates private enterprise to protect the consumer. If the state is to protect the educational consumer, should not private institutions also be subject to assessment for that purpose? I make this point not to argue for the inclusion of private institutions in such assessment, but to argue for the exclusion of public ones.

If intellectual diversity and freedom are crucial to private institutions, can they be less essential to public ones? If the state supports public institutions to provide educational

opportunity, should that opportunity be inferior in intellectual freedom simply because those institutions are public? Although both accurate information and intellectual freedom are desirable goals, intellectual freedom is essential because it lies at the heart of the academic process.

The Positive Use of Assessment

Now, having dealt with what I believe should be avoided, I would like to discuss what I believe might be done. As I mentioned earlier, the weaknesses of the current system of assessment are that most institutions do not fully evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum, particularly the general education component, and that data which are already available are not effectively used. This is due to a number of factors including faculty opposition, lack--until recently--of appropriate instruments, lack of information support systems, lack of training on how to use assessment results, and lack of staff and faculty to do the job of transmitting the information to the students in an appropriate manner.

I personally believe that assessment can be more effectively used. The improvement of the use of assessment must take place within the context of maintaining and enhancing the dynamism and flexibility of the educational system. To do this, assessment should be encouraged at the institutional level and should use multiple indicators to evaluate such components of the educational process as knowledge acquisition, problem solving skills, values and attitudes, and satisfaction with the

institution and job after graduation. This evaluation should take place within the context of the mission of the institution.

Instruments and techniques to achieve these purposes are now available and relatively inexpensive. But the actual testing or assessment is the least expensive part of an assessment system. The utilization of the data resulting from assessment is the important and expensive part of assessment.

As I indicated earlier, higher education is an assessed system. We have a great deal of data which we do not use effectively. A number of steps must be taken to improve the effectiveness of its use. There is too great a tendency to view the assessment process as ending with the production of a test result or a number. If assessment is to be an effective tool in improving the quality of education, the results must be used, and that takes money.

First, the data must be converted to information. The test results or enrollment data from one year is not useful. It must be put into comparative context before it becomes useful. This is normally the responsibility of institutional research or some other administrative office.

Second, the information must be communicated to the relevant decision makers and appropriately interpreted. This is a weak point of the current system. Many administrators and faculty are not accustomed to using a variety of assessment instruments and results and must be trained in their appropriate use and limitations. This will require a staff development effort.

Third, there must be financial and psychological support available so that those who receive the information can make changes. It does little good to know what is wrong if there are no resources available for change or improvement. In some cases this can be handled through a reassignment of duties or a shift of emphasis in a program. But in many cases additional resources will be required to implement a change. For example, we know that commuter students have a difficult time in forming a supportive relationship with a faculty member and other students during the first year. At Towson, we are trying a new type of orientation program for commuter students. The cost is $9,000. We are restructuring our freshman English course to improve support of the general education program. We estimate the cost of planning, implementing, and evaluating this change at $60,000 to $70,000. We need to increase hands-on computer time of our computer science students. The cost for renovation and equipment is slightly over $200,000.

Fourth, the role of the faculty should be recognized. The faculty has a major role in the development and approval of curriculum. In the last three decades the faculty has become increasingly professionalized and discipline oriented. This process started during the late 1800s and has continued to intensify. The research and publication model has been adopted by comprehensive and liberal arts colleges. As a result, faculty concern with the curriculum has become specialized and more

discipline oriented.

Many faculty are deeply committed to liberal education. However, most evaluations of liberal education have been intuitive and not based on formal assessment. There is need to increase faculty development efforts to encourage and support faculty in evaluating the overall impact of the curriculum. Faculty are deeply involved in assessment and evaluation of themselves and their peers. Faculty effectiveness in teaching is evaluated by students and by peers. This system of evaluating faculty is not perfect, but it is continuous and thorough. Perhaps the weakest area of self-evaluation of faculty as a body is in carrying out their responsibility as developers and evaluators of the curriculum--a responsibility which they vigorously assert and defend. The evaluation of this curricular responsibility is carried out by the accrediting associations and by internal program reviews. Since effective assessment of the curriculum may lead to changes, the faculty must be involved if changes are to be effective. I believe that continued control of the curriculum by the faculty is essential. Although the system is not perfect, its decentralization protects intellectual freedom, experimentation, and change. I do not believe that any other body or agency could do it as well.

Recommendations

These are personal recommendations, not approved formally by AASCU.

In some areas of critical importance to our society we

evaluate the process rather than any specific outcome. Examples are freedom of speech, political freedom, religious freedom, and litigation. This may lead to what some would regard as inefficiency in that no one goal can be accomplished clearly, nor can one opinion be easily imposed on others. But in these essential areas of our society, the integrity of the process is more important than efficiency in getting everyone to say the same thing, to advocate the same political program, to affirm the same religion, or to find all accused guilty. The process of higher education belongs among these social processes.

Governors, legislators, judges, college presidents, and faculty are all state employees. All owe their allegiance to the citizens of the state for the efficient discharge of their responsibilities and duties. An essential part of those responsibilities and duties is to say "No" to a branch of government if it decrees or mandates an action which is destructive of freedom of speech, political advocacy, religious belief or academic freedom. Therefore, I recommend that state-wide assessment tests, such as a rising junior test, not be mandated. I believe the potential of long term injury to our system of higher education outweighs any short term benefits.

I also wish to make positive recommendations which are designed to preserve the academic process while providing encouragement and guidance in strengthening it.

First, the state should request each institution to develop an assessment system and report on the functioning of that system

annually. This report should include what decisions or actions were caused or influenced by the evaluation system.

Second, the state should insure that each institution has adequate staff and computer facilities to fully utilize the information resulting from the assessment system.

Third, the state should establish a fund to be utilized on a grant or other incentive basis to support changes and innovations resulting from the assessment system.

Fourth, the state should request that the appropriate regional accrediting association include review of the institutional assessment system a part of the accreditation process.

Summary

Educators are professionals who want to do a good job. The institutions should be encouraged to make appropriate use of assessment and trusted to do so. Most of them will. The development of centralized state-wide assessment systems may seem appealing as a quick fix. However, the diversity and decentralization of higher education are important in protecting the intellectual freedom and vitality of our educational system. The practice of self-criticism is essential to our social and technological development. Ways must be found to improve assessment while not threatening the intellectual freedom that lies at the heart of higher education.

Appendix
Answers to Questions Posed By Committee Members

Do we know how to do assessment?

In general, the answer is yes. But because educational goals are varied, there are a large number of methods of assessment. Accurate assessment will be complex and not yield simple, readily understood conclusions. Accurate assessment will be most useful in assisting professionals in improving education.

What kinds of learning should be assessed?

This is the most sensitive of all questions. As I indicated in my formal statement, there is great value in our current method of goal setting, even though it does result in some lack of coherence. There is real fear in the academic community that centralized testing will mean centralized goal setting, teaching to the test, and intellectual stagnation.

Since many of the complaints about college graduates focus on basic skills, any centralized test should focus on these skills. That would be the least dangerous to intellectual freedom. However, it would not test the broad range of cognitive and attitudinal goals of higher education.

Testing other forms of learning should be institutional responsibilities.

Are faculty and students willing to go along?

Students will be willing to go along if they are required to do so. Many will also go along if they are selected on a random sampling basis and the reasons for the assessment and their selection are explained.

There is strong faculty opposition to mandatory, statewide testing. There is potential support for increased institutional testing and assessment. But, if assessment is to be effective in improving education faculty must be convinced that it is desirable and will not threaten academic freedom. The crucial point is to get faculty to use assessment as a tool, rather than feeling that it is a threat. Faculty need to be better informed about the potential of assessment to improve education. This has not been part of their training. Faculty will be more supportive if the state shows its commitment by financially supporting assessment and providing support for the implementation of actions based on assessment.

Does assessment cost too much?

The administration of assessment instruments is moderately expensive, depending on the instrument. But the cost of the instrument is only a small part of an assessment system. The expense comes in recording the results, training people to use the information, implementing changes, and evaluating the effectiveness of those changes.

Will assessment punish underprepared or minority students?

Accurate assessment will describe a condition. That condition is how well someone performs on a specific evaluation instrument. If someone scores low on the instrument, that is only descriptive of their ability in relation to the instrument. It simply means that the under prepared are underprepared. Improper use of assessment results might be harmful.

Do adequate instruments for conducting assessment exist?

Adequate instruments of assessment exist for many purposes. The most difficult area to assess is the general education component of the curriculum. The ACT-COMP test is well validated, but is relatively expensive to administer.

How do parents and children determine if a school is a good one?

This is a very complex issue. The question is not whether the school is a good one, but whether it's good for a specific person. Harvard may be best for some while Grambling is better for others. What makes a school a good one for an individual is complex and involves a fit of many variables. A school is a good one for the individual if it meets the purposes of the student and if it has a sense of intellectual excitement.

There are a number of good guides to choosing a college. The most important factors to most students in making a choice are affordability, presence of the program the student wants, location, and academic reputation. After selecting a range of schools, the student should visit them to see how the "fit" is. The most powerful factors in doing well in college are feeling comfortable in the institution and getting involved.

What should institutions do to see how much learning is taking place?

The grading system is relatively effective in evaluating how much students have learned from a course. Institutions use a number of other tests and techniques to evaluate the

effectiveness of their programs. As I have indicated earlier, I believe that the area of evaluation that needs greatest attention is evaluation of the effectiveness of the general education component of the curriculum.